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ABSTRACT

In a composition classroom with a multicultural emphasis, reader response techniques can give students the chance to consider their own positions in the dominant culture, to confront racist attitudes within themselves, and to try to empathize with minority views. These techniques lead to a more student-centered classroom where students not only read and discuss texts, but also create their own. Applying reader response criticism helps to refocus the activities of the classroom from the teacher and the text to the interaction of the text with the reader--and thus to encourage students to take a more active role in interpreting texts. Such techniques are adaptable to works that are not necessarily literary. One such text, "Rereading America: Cultural Contexts for Critical Thinking and Writing," which focuses on important cultural myths (i.e., success, progress, gender, the melting pot, the model family) suggests a range of reader response exercises students and teachers can use to investigate ideas about in-group and out-group identity. Reader response techniques can be a useful way to allow students a stronger voice in their own learning. (SAM)

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Pamela K. Shaffer

Using Reader-Response Techniques to Teach Multicultural Writings in the Composition Classroom

Living as we do in a country which is moving from a monocultural perspective to one which is multicultural, composition teachers in predominantly white classrooms need to offer students an opportunity to be involved in the dynamic process of reading and writing from a multicultural viewpoint. In a composition classroom with a multicultural emphasis, students can be given the chance to consider their own position in the dominant culture, to confront racist attitudes within themselves, and to try to empathize with minority views. This often requires that students must be jarred from their complacency and indifference toward those outside their own social class and race.

One means to do this is through using techniques derived from reader-response criticism. These techniques lead to more student-centered, more democratic classrooms where students are required not only to read and discuss texts but also to create their own. A teacher who uses reader-response techniques can help change the customary behavior of passive students by creating a classroom atmosphere which encourages them to examine their own beliefs and assumptions about life in the United States, to see them in relation to others whose assumptions may be different, and then to articulate what those differences mean. Educators can help students reach a deeper understanding of themselves and their culture by providing classroom experiences which are more student-centered and which demand that they see themselves in relation to other ethnic and racial groups. In classes of predominantly white students, teachers have the obligation not only to introduce the notion of cultural diversity but also to get students to acknowledge the humanness of people of other cultures and races.

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With this in view, the purpose of this presentation is to examine the ways a composition teacher can involve students in the acts of reading and writing to the extent that they discover aspects of themselves and their culture and try to articulate those discoveries by writing about them. In short, the goal is to produce more literate students able not only to read and interpret but also to manipulate language.

To do this, the activities which take place in the classroom must involve the student more fully in the act of reading and writing. The focus of attention must be away from the teacher as source of all knowledge to students as active participants in their own education. As Mary Rose O'Reilley says, "In the student-centered classroom, we're not just teaching people to write, but nurturing new social structures and ways of seeing the world--whether or not that is our conscious intent. We are fostering cooperation and community" (143).

One approach that shows promise as a means to "democritize" the classroom is reader-response criticism. In recent years, reader-response criticism has been adapted to classroom use as a means to help students become active participants in the discussions of texts and to help them recognize the validity of their own responses to literary texts. Applying reader-response criticism to classroom use has helped to refocus the activities of the classroom from the teacher and the text to the interaction of text with the reader--in other words, to encourage students to take a more active role in interpreting texts. In works by Robert Probst, Nicholas Karolides, and numerous articles concerned with the teaching profession, the theories of Louise Rosenblatt, Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, and others have been put to the use of teaching literature.

However, the techniques for exploring literary texts are adaptable to works that are not necessarily literary. In a composition class where various kinds of

writing are studied through texts which have an expository or persuasive purpose, a teacher can incorporate some of the methods of instruction derived from reader-response criticism. All of the theories of literature which are considered within reader-response criticism focus on the importance of the reader in contributing to the meaning of a text. This approach differs from traditional approaches to interpreting texts in which the text is seen as having its own meaning, which is discoverable through the close examination of its structure. In the traditional view of interpretation, the author's intent determines the meaning of a text and this meaning can be found (Karolides 28). Yet the theories which make up reader-response criticism vary in their interpretation of the role of readers. For example, subjective criticism emphasizes the reader's internal state and motives, whereas the transactional theory of literature and reception aesthetics focus on the reader and text equally, emphasizing the way the reader's experience and intentions fuse with the text (Karolides 22). It is the transactional theory of literature, as first formulated by Louise Rosenblatt and the work of Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss, known as reception aesthetics, which will be the basis for techniques adaptable to the composition class.

According to Rosenblatt, readers are not just passive, with the text acting upon them, but rather the reader and text affect each other with the result the creation of meaning: "It is a situation, an event at a particular time and place in which each element conditions the other" (16). In Rosenblatt's view, it is in the reader's transaction with the text that meaning is created. This view also acknowledges that for different readers or for the same reader at different times and in different situations, the text may yield different meanings. Thus, various interpretations of a text are possible.

Wolfgang Iser examines the role of the text and points out that the text controls and directs the reader's response. The text offers a "structure that enables the reader to break out of his accustomed framework of conventions, so allowing him to formulate that which has been unleashed by the text" (50). As they read, for a time, readers lose themselves to the work, entering the mind of another and leaving behind their own thoughts and perspectives. Yet the reader's own perspective serves as a background against which "the prevailing thoughts of the author take on thematic significance" and without which they would be incomprehensible. Iser goes on to say that reading a literary work allows the reader to discover aspects about himself which were not evident to him before. Thus, through a literary experience, the reader learns about the self: ". . . a layer of the reader's personality is brought to light which had hitherto remained hidden in the shadows. . . .The significance of the work, then, does not lie in the meaning sealed within the text, but in the fact that that meaning brings out what had previously been sealed within us" (157). Thus, for Iser, reading is an act of self-discovery which enables readers to lose themselves for a time in a text, only to find themselves again and to know themselves better than before.

In addition to self-discovery, reading also serves a social function. Through reading, individuals can explore their relation to the culture in which they live. According to Hans Robert Jauss, "The experience of reading can liberate one from adaptations, prejudices, and predicaments of a lived praxis in that it compels one to a new perception of things. . . .[It] broadens the limited space of social behavior for new desires, claims, and goals, and thereby opens paths of future experience" (41). Thus, through reading, readers can define themselves in relation to their culture. Literature instructs the reader "in the conventions of meaning peculiar to the society, giving the members of the group a common conceptual framework. And it reshapes

that framework by bringing to bear on it what is unique in the writer and in the reader. Thus it forms the reader to fit his culture and reforms the culture to fit the reader" (Probst 249).

All of the theorists cited above are concerned with the act of reading literature, yet, as mentioned above, much of what they say can apply to works that are not necessarily literary. Nonfiction essays which are meant to inform and/or persuade can be read and discussed using the same techniques devised to elicit responses from students as they derive meaning from literature. What is primary is the emphasis on student-centered discussion, with the teacher providing an atmosphere in which students feel free to voice their interpretations regardless of how tentative they feel they are. To get students to respond, the topics must have some relevance to their lives. Furthermore, the topics must be studied inductively. It is only through these means that the students become involved to such an extent that they ask meaningful questions (Christenbury 34).

If the aim of a composition class is not only to teach the privileged forms of writing but also to introduce to the students a multicultural viewpoint, then a first step is to offer readings which broaden the perspective of the students. A wealth of multicultural readers currently available for composition classes makes it relatively easy for instructors to use this approach. But in classes of predominantly white students, teachers are faced with the following question: How can students be made to care about the perspective of people whose experiences and values they may not share? One way is to start with assumptions and beliefs we all share about life in the United States. A text which uses this approach is Rereading America: Cultural Contexts for Critical Thinking and Writing, Second Edition, edited by Gary Colombo, Robert Cullen , and Bonnie Lisle. Focusing on important cultural myths, the editors of this text recognize that all students can relate to the assumptions which

most Americans hold dear. In chapters which deal with the myths of success, progress, gender, the melting pot, the model family, and others, Rereading America presents essays which in most cases are a counterpoint to dominant cultural myths. The following description of class activities for helping students arrive at a multicultural viewpoint are adaptations of exercises in Rereading America and are meant to offer teachers ways to get students to relate their own views to the dominant cultural myths.

Since most of the life experiences of students in the predominantly white classes I teach have not involved them in encounters with people of different races and cultures, one of the best ways to raise their consciousness regarding the issue of race and culture is to consider the myth of the melting pot. Students are asked to find images in the popular media (newspapers, magazines, TV shows, movies, pop music) which perpetuate the myth of the melting pot. They are then asked to identify some other metaphors which are used to describe racial and ethnic group relations. Students then read Gordon Allport's essay "Formation of In-Groups," in Rereading America (292–307), listing in their notebooks the in-groups and out-groups to which they themselves belong. In a reader-response classroom, the role of the teacher is to ask questions, not to tell students what the meaning of a particular passage is. Whenever possible, the teacher must encourage student participation by referring to comments already made in the discussion and by asking other students to comment on specific responses (Christenbury 38-42). So in the discussion of the Allport essay, I ask students to summarize and explain certain passages and to find Allport's definitions of key terms. I do not supply or impose my own interpretations, but rather I direct questions to other students should any student be puzzled. At every opportunity I try to have students connect the principles underlying in-group formation with their own personal experience.

Having examined their own in-group memberships, the students are then asked to identify several in-groups which have the most meaning for them and to elaborate in their notebooks the ways in which their in-group membership has changed in the last five years. Another aspect of in-group membership and the conflicts between in-group and out-group membership are explored in Adrienne Rich's essay "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity," which is also among the essays in Rereading America (307-18). In this essay Rich analyzes her own identity, examining the cultural groups that have formed her values and loyalties. In their notebooks, students are asked to identify the various conflicting selves that compete for recognition with her identity: "white, Jewish, anti-Semite, racist, antiracist, once-married, lesbian, middle-class, feminist, ex-matriate southerner." After reading and discussing the essay, students again examine their list of in-group and out-group memberships, commenting briefly in their notebooks on conflicts between the two. Then students are asked to write an essay which identifies two to three in-group memberships which mean the most to them and to explain the reasons why they do. An alternative approach they may take is to write a comparison/contrast of present in-group memberships with those of, say, five years ago, considering the reasons for any differences. Since the composition class requires students to study rhetorical modes, as part of our discussion of the readings, we identify and discuss the rhetorical strategies used by both Allport and Rich. Then, as they work on their essays, students are asked to use definition, cause/effect, and comparison/contrast strategies in their own essays. Further, through peer editing, students identify the rhetorical strategies used by other writers in the class.

To continue the application of Allport's ideas about prejudice as it relates to in-group and out-group identity, we then read Studs Terkel's interview of C. P.

Ellis, in Rereading America (336-46). In responding to this essay, students are asked to identify in their notebooks the steps C. P. Ellis takes in his transformation from Ku Klux Klan member to union leader who has come to empathize with both blacks and women. In class, we discuss process as a strategy for organizing ideas and then students are asked to look at the reasons behind C. P. Ellis's taking the steps he does in his transformation, identifying primary and secondary causes. After more discussion, we view the film The Long Walk Home with the intention of identifying the steps a middle class white woman goes through in a transformation similar to that of C. P. Ellis in sympathizing with the circumstances of Blacks in the South. Just as with C. P. Ellis, students are asked to examine the reasons for the transformation and list them in their notebooks. Although the changes the two people go through are similar, factors in their socio-economic status, the time-frame, and reasons for the change differ markedly. Then students write an essay which compares and contrasts the experiences of both people, with an emphasis on the process that each went through and the causes of each step in the process.

Another work within Rereading America which lends itself to reader-response techniques is the story "The Lesson," by Toni Cade Bambara. In the section on the myth of success and individual opportunity, the story concerns the realization by a young black teenage girl and her friends of the social inequity of which they are a part. I begin by asking students to think of an experience when they were younger in which they realized that the cost of an item they wanted was much more than they could afford. In their notebooks students describe their reactions to that circumstance. Then they are assigned the story "The Lesson" and asked to consider the reactions of the protagonist Sylvia and her friends as they realize that they are part of an unjust economic system. In class, I pose questions which require students to compare their own reactions with those of Sylvia and her

friends to not being able to afford an object. As in other discussions, students are forced to struggle with their own and others' interpretations. They are asked to compare and contrast Miss Moore's view of the disparities in wealth in a society like ours with that of Andrew Carnegie in another essay, "The Gospel of Wealth," read earlier. Working in groups, students then compose a brief biography of Sylvia, imagining what her life has been like subsequent to the events of "The Lesson." The biographies are then read aloud in class.

Through the use of prewriting notebook exercises mentioned here, classroom discussion which is more student-centered, and the viewing of films which focus on the experiences of people of other ethnic groups and races, students can indirectly examine their own racial attitudes and prejudices without having to reveal them publicly. Asking students to identify the motivation of the people under discussion, the instructor can get them to articulate their own feelings by relating them to a wider pattern of cultural assumptions. Hence, composition class can be a place where students not only master the forms of academic writing but also begin to learn a multicultural perspective. Using reader-response techniques can be a useful way to allow the students a stronger voice in their own learning and a way for them to reach beyond empathy to a greater understanding of others.

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